

**Transcript- For Public Distribution**

**U.S. Ambassador to Azerbaijan Richard Morningstar**  
**IREX Media Ethics Seminar Remarks**  
**Park Inn Hotel**  
**Baku, Azerbaijan**  
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**Ambassador Morningstar:** It is great to be here today, because I do not see that there is any subject more important in Azerbaijan than media ethics and the development of a professional media. It is necessary for freedom of the press. It is necessary to accomplish all of the things that I think everybody here wants to accomplish with respect to this.

I have said many times since I have been here how much the United States supports press freedom in Azerbaijan. In the United States and in other countries and other democracies, we have learned that a free and independent media not only inform and educate the public, but also help hold authorities accountable for their actions.

The press actually gives us the trained set of eyes and ears that can identify the problems in a way that ordinary citizens often cannot. Media reporting also provides important information for government officials and lets them know how well or how poorly they and their subordinates are really doing in implementing improvements to society.

We talk a lot about access to media and freedom of the press, both of which are extremely important all the time, but especially in this election period. They are critical to free and fair elections. But I would emphasize again for the media to be truly free it must also be responsible. I think this is what this seminar is all about.

With apologies to the many respectable and skilled journalists of which there are many here today, I want to talk a little bit about some of the problems I have seen with respect to the state of journalism here in Azerbaijan. Journalists, I think more than anything, else have a professional and ethical responsibility to report the facts to the best of their ability with clarity and with objectivity. Skilled journalists should be working day and night to corroborate the information before reporting

it—to know that it is the case, that it is true --- before you report. This is necessary not only to ensure the flow of accurate information to your readers and customers, but also to protect and promote the reputation of the journalistic profession.

And very frankly, many times here in Azerbaijan, I see outlets publishing reports that are based purely on rumor and speculation, and too often I see misquotes. Too often I see facts that are just totally incorrect and look like they have been made up. I will have to tell you that I have seen it across the whole spectrum of the media. On the internet, I have seen it in opposition press, and I also have seen it in the mainstream press as well.

Sometimes I wonder when I can believe what I see what is reported in the press. Again, I am not saying this happens all the time. I am not saying it happens with every journalist. I know many of you are skilled and objective, but it does happen too often.

Just one little example: I was sitting at my desk in my office one day and I saw on the internet a report from some publication (I do not even remember which publication it was) reporting that I was in Washington—having been called back for emergency consultations. This was at the same time that I was sitting at my desk in Baku reading the report. That is just one of many instances.

We are constantly calling the press (and again this has nothing to do with whether it is mainstream or opposition or independent or whatever), insisting on corrections.

My concern is—and again I hear it from a lot of people, again, whether opposition people or government people—that this creates a lot of damage to the journalistic profession in the eyes of readers, and it is a disservice to all of you who are trying to do the best job possible.

So, again, that is why I think a meeting like this today is so important.

The other thing that we need to always be careful about is unfortunately sometimes when brave journalists break the mold and apply international

journalistic reporting standards to their work to produce reporting which may criticize the status quo, they too often come under attack. But frankly, again, I am deeply disappointed by the lack of progress in the investigation of the smear campaign against Khadija Ismayilova. No journalist, in fact, no human being should endure some of the things that she has gone through as a result of sticking to her reporting.

And you do not need to agree with everything that Khadija says. I do not agree necessarily with everything that Khadija says, but that is the value of the free press. Again, nobody should have to put up with what she and other journalists have had to put up with. And, frankly, these kinds of attacks only serve sometimes to damage Azerbaijan's image. It is totally unnecessary.

Going back to the theme of general media ethics, I do not want to sound too much like a complainer in some of the earlier things that I said because nobody (no person and no country) is perfect on this. We all make mistakes at different points in time. And it is true not just here. It is true in other parts of the world. It is true in the United States as well. But today I am talking about Azerbaijan because I really care about Azerbaijan. The United States really cares about Azerbaijan. We want to see Azerbaijan be successful. An open media with responsible and ethical journalists I think will be a major factor in Azerbaijan's continuing development. Azerbaijan has a proud journalistic tradition going all the way back to the mid-Nineteenth century.

During my time here I have met dozens of journalists and media executives—maybe hundreds. I am proud to call them and many of you friends. Again, I share my concerns today because I want the best for the journalists and for the journalism profession here in Azerbaijan.

So again, it is a pleasure to be part of this conference. I think this represents a solid step forward in the struggle to restore Azerbaijan's proud journalistic tradition and, again, thank you to IREX and USAID for sponsoring the conference. I am also glad that Mr. Amashov from the Azerbaijan Press Council is here today. I hope my comments will spark some interesting discussion. Maybe you will not agree with everything that I say, but hopefully it will give some gist to the discussion as we move on today.

Thank you.

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